

Lost or Found

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[0 : 0 0] The reading together in Luke's Gospel chapter 15 and then look at this passage together this evening and afterwards we're going to sing a couple of Psalms in response to God and to his word.

Page 1049 we've looked and read the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. We come to the most famous probably of all the parables, the parable of what we would call the parable of the prodigal son or the lost son.

Jesus continued, there was a man who had two sons, the younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate so he divided his property between them.

Not long after that the younger son got together all that he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating but no one gave him anything.

[1 : 0 5] When he came to his senses he said, how many of my father's hired men have food to spare? And here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to his father, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.

[2 : 1 5] When he came near to the house he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I have been slaving for you.

And I have never disobeyed your orders. Yet you have never given me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him.

My son, the father said, you are always with me. And everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad. Because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. J.C.Rile, one of the great biblical leaders of last century, the century before that now in England said of this chapter that there is no other chapter in the Bible has done greater good.

[3 : 34] And who would argue with him on that particular point? And tonight we want to look at this chapter and maybe do something we don't do very often, which is look at it as a whole.

We are probably more used to taking one of the parables and unpacking it in great detail. But I like to look at the passage as a whole. Jesus gave this teaching as a whole.

And there is a beautiful theme, a great theme that runs through this chapter that I want us to look at this evening. And particularly in relation to our Christianity, what we think of our Christianity and what we think of our Christianity in relation to other people who aren't Christians.

It's one of the reasons I pray tonight for family and friends who aren't Christians. Because we have this great burden and a great concern for them. The Pharisees in this chapter, as Jesus teaches against their thinking, had a bad attitude to what Jesus was doing with people, with other people.

They muttered, you know this great phrase that is used in the Bible to emphasise a discontented unhappiness with what Jesus was doing. They muttered as it were under their breath.

[4 : 53] This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. They had a rotten attitude to other people. They had a rotten attitude to people that weren't like them.

To people who didn't know the Gospel, hadn't had the privileges that they had. And Jesus speaks powerfully against it and gives us this triumph of great parables for us to look at this evening.

Last night we looked at the previous chapter, which in beautiful terms spoke about our Christianity as a feast. As being invited to and having the provision of a banquet.

And I think that's significant as we go into this passage about lostness. Because the attitude we have to our salvation has an effect on how we will share that Gospel with those who don't know.

So in this chapter, Jesus gets across to us that he and God value the lost.

[6 : 02] This is a parable about people who are lost, who aren't believers, who are alienated as James was speaking about this morning. Alienated from God, who don't know Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour.

And Jesus here describes that condition as being a condition of lostness. Being out of Christ, being away from Christ, being separated from Christ.

Christ himself says the picture he wants to give is a picture of lostness, being lost. This is his definition of what it is not to be a Christian.

It's to be away from him, lost, not found by him. And all that lostness implies we can characterise not being a Christian as being like.

It is being far from God, not seen by God, hidden from God. And yet the reality and the theme of this passage is that God wants to find his people.

[7 : 16] God wants to find those who are lost and wants to find them because they are valuable. We have a sheep, one of a hundred, but nonetheless valuable to the shepherd.

He leaves the 99 to look for the lost sheep. A coin, valuable to the woman, even though she may have nine other coins.

This is a coin of value to her. And I suppose it kind of increases in intensity from a sheep to money to a son.

And here we have a son who is to all intents and purposes lost. And there's this image and this impression of value that God has for people who aren't believers.

You know one of Satan's greatest weapons throughout history and in our lives is that we, or other people, have no value.

[8 : 23] That we are worthless. A lack of worth is a most destructive of all characteristics in our lives. Either a lack of self-worth which leaves us with no confidence and no sense of value.

Or a sense of having no respect and appreciation of other people. You know a society where people are cheap and worthless is a broken and godless and an evil society.

And Satan's greatest weapon often for us is to say, you have no worth. You're a worthless individual to yourself. You're worthless to other people and above all you are worthless to God.

But Jesus here is reminding us that we are valuable to God. We have great value. And as I say, he heightens that till we get to the great and well-known parable to us of the lost son.

Some of you here might know, I don't know if many of you will, but some of you anyway here will know Kenny McDonald. He's now a retired minister in the free church. When I first met Kenny, it was in 1981, summer camp in Dornath School it was then.

[9 : 48] I was just a boy. But Kenny was quite old even then. But Kenny that summer lost his 18-year-old daughter Alison.

And Kenny's life ever since then, and I went on to be an assistant with him in Raskin for five years in the ministry and learned invaluable lessons from his life. But his life from then on was changed by that event.

And his whole ministry and his whole being has been moulded and characterised by the loss of his daughter. And by what that means. And as he would say and testify himself with all the boldness of his faith, everything, everything about Alison being lost has been good, apart from her being found.

Everything else was good. The way God used it in so many different ways has been good, except that she herself hasn't been found by them.

She went missing in India as an 18-year-old on holiday there. And that is life was changed. And it's as if in the same way, or in a maybe a completely different way, that the whole character of God is revealed and exposed and moulded by the reality of our lostness.

[11 : 14] Because his whole character and the glory of his character is revealed in his redemption and in his bringing us back the cost, the search, the pain, the suffering, the bleeding, all that goes with his salvation is incredibly intertwined with his finding us.

And our whole understanding of his nature revolves around salvation and about being found. So we recognise and see our value to God.

It's as if his nature, his character depends on how he has responded to our rebellion and our sin.

But also in God valuing the lost, it should mould and educate and inform our perspective of other people.

Not like the Pharisees who said, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. How can he do that?

[12 : 26] And our perspective of others should be moulded by Jesus because he wants us to be Christ-like also. And our attitude to other people, to be Christ-like, is to love people who are lost and broken and who need healed.

And is that a certain segment of society? Is that a certain part of the world in which we live? I don't think so. I think it's just an encouragement to look and see and understand people as people who without Christ are lost.

From whatever strata or section of society they happen to be in. We see them differently, see their spiritual condition as people without Christ who need to be found by him.

And we recognise and see them in that way. What do we think of all the friends we have? We have lots of friends. This congregation here, it's a small congregation tonight. But I'm sure if we added up all the contacts and the friendships and the family relatives that we have, it would be a big number of people.

We have a wide sphere of influence, even as a small congregation. How do we see all of these people, and I think particularly of those who aren't Christians, do we just regard them as family members?

[13 : 57] With whom we have blood links? Do we see our friends just as friends? Friends that we are in contact with? Friends that we speak to? Friends that we share many things in common with?

Are we people who have no time for those who aren't Christians and live in a Christian bubble? Do we think, well they just deserve that because they've rejected God?

Or do we see with Christ's eyes and see our friends and see our acquaintances and see our blood brothers and sisters and those we are closest to without Christ as lost?

Because that's how Jesus wants us to see them. He wants us to see them with spiritual eyes. He wants us to have that perspective which will inform our thinking and our prayer life and our conversation and the way we think, so that really it's much more important what we're like out of here than how we are in here.

It's easy to think about them in a lost condition in here, from the safety of a Christian environment, but when we interact with them and rub shoulders with them on a day to day basis, do we see them with the eyes that Jesus sees them with?

[15 : 16] It should inform our perception of other people. God values the lost, but there's another theme that comes through in all of these three parables, and we're kind of looking at them, I guess, thematically just as they have interlinking points to make.

We see not only that God values the lost, but God rejoices in salvation. He rejoices when people become Christians.

Look at verse 7, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost cheat. Oh, that's sorry, that's coming into verse 7, and I tell you that the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who, in their own minds, feel that they don't need to repent.

Or verse 10, in the same way I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Or in the parable of the lost son, let's have a feast and celebrate in verse 23. Each of these parables have this great emphasis of rejoicing in salvation.

[16 : 36] It's the atmosphere of heaven. There is rejoicing in heaven. We're given a link from a world of lostness, a world where people come to faith, and the link takes us straight into the very courtroom of heaven itself, and there's rejoicing there.

So therefore, there is a link between what happens on earth and how heaven responds. Heaven's not some esoteric place far away that has no link or no contact or no interest in what's happening here on earth.

Heaven is aware of what's happening here on earth. Heaven looks with kingdom eyes about what's happening here on earth, and when people become Christians here on earth, there's rejoicing in heaven.

It's front page news in heaven that people become Christians. Isn't that different from the kind of news that makes the front page all the time here? They're not interested in bad news and scandals in heaven.

It's front page news when people become Christians. Rejoicing when Georgie and John and Andrew and Kim and all of the people who have professed faith in this congregation either today or in the last number of days, or the last number of years, became Christians.

[17 : 44] It was praiseworthy. It was noted in the rooms of heaven, and it was a cause for rejoice, because it brings glory to God, doesn't it? It is the fulfillment of the Lord's prayer, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

It is the coming closer of Jesus' return with each redeemed soul. And it's a cause in heaven of great rejoicing.

One sinner doesn't need to be 99. It doesn't need to be a thousand. One sinner brings great rejoicing, because it's the atmosphere of heaven.

And as people are being saved all around the world at all times, and in every day and generation, there is this atmosphere of rejoicing in heaven. Simply don't get tired of it.

And I think that atmosphere and that emphasis of rejoicing is good. And I think it's good for us in this battle.

[18 : 50] Because the Christian life here and now is a battle. It's not easy. We struggle from day to day. But it helps us when we rejoice, and when we soak in the atmosphere of heaven, and when we share in being soul winners ourselves, so that we know God is glorified when His kingdom grows and heaven rejoices.

That's why in many ways we want big churches. I want a big church so that there's lots of people who are saved, and that heaven's rejoicing, and that His kingdom is coming, because it brings glory to God, because God values the lost.

And rejoicing helps us. And praise helps us. And I think the more we understand, the more we're involved, the more that we are kingdom people, the more we're sharing the gospel with our friends out of here, and they're moving towards Christ on a day to day basis, the more we will find reason to praise Him in here.

I think that's true, because we are returning to God praise for what He's doing. We read at the beginning of the service, F and I, 3.17, and let's read it verse that we have that speaks about God rejoicing.

Zephaniah 3 and verse 17. He will quiet you with His love. He will rejoice over you with singing. That's speaking about God as the Savior God.

[20 : 30] The Lord that says, is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will rejoice over you with singing. And I think singing is from God, and it's been given from God for us to express our joy and celebration in belonging and in knowing.

And as we hear from Calum and Liz tonight about what's happening in India, we should respond with praise and we're singing when there's joy. Because, you know what James was saying this morning about the problems in the early church about separating soul and body?

We mustn't do the same, because we're tempted to. We're tempted just to think about our salvation purely in soul terms. But you know we're body too, and God's given us body that likes song, and song to praise Him and feel good and feel better from it.

Because that is what He's given us song for. When people sing at concerts, when they sing at football matches, when they sing at weddings, when they sing in celebration, when they sing in the bath, it's because they want to praise and they feel good.

God has given us song to express joy, and it's not big enough in our lives, and it's not big enough in our worship. God rejoices in salvation, so must we, because it helps us in the battle.

[21 : 52] This life is a battle, and we need to be able to praise and to sense the atmosphere of heaven. So is salvation here then, and we look at briefly the parable of the lost Son, is salvation being found, or is it coming back?

Because it seems there's a different emphasis here. Is it that God finds us, or is it like the lost Son, He comes back to God? What is it? What is salvation?

Do we just sit back and wait? Well if people are going to be saved, the church doors are open, they can come in and God will find them. Or is it that people need to look for God and find Him?

Are there different ways to God? Does He God seek some and do others seek God? No, I think the emphasis is one here. Or the teaching is one and the emphasis is slightly different.

We recognize God seeks the lost, but we also recognize that we are found by Him, and in being found by Him we are returning to Him in repentance.

[23 : 06] And this parable does speak about turning back to God when we are found by Him. And there are some classic elements in repentance here, turning back to God, which should characterize all of our lives, both when we first turn back, and as we turn back on a day-to-day regular basis, these things should be in our lives.

What is that? Just mention three things briefly. Becoming aware of our need. That must be in every person who will be found by God.

And that is what we seek to engender within people as we witness to them a sense of their need. This guy here, when he came to his senses in verse 17 says, How many of my fathers hired men have food to spare?

And here I'm starving to death. He'll set out and go back. There's a sense of need. Again, if we're talking about the lie of Satan, and he's said so much about our worthlessness, one of his other lies is that we don't need God.

From the very beginning, isn't that what he said? What did he say to Adam and Eve? It's okay. Take the fruit. You will not surely die. You don't need God. You can live without Him. You can be lords yourself.

[24 : 33] Just eat the fruit. You'll be like God's. You don't need God. And ever since, people are kept from Christ because they say we don't need Him.

We're not lost. Don't talk in such ridiculous Victorian terms. We're not lost. But until people recognize a sense of spiritual lostness, separation from God, not knowing God, being alone from God, being guilty before God, they will never seek Him. And we will never continue as believers if we lose a sense of need.

Each day, I am as fragile as thin glass. And I need God to stop me from breaking.

That is the reality of our lives, that without Him, we remain alone and lost and broken. It's our sense of need. But also, along with that, an honest confession of personal sin.

This is repeated twice in the passage, verses 18, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you as He rehearses it. No longer worthy to be called your son. And then later, when He meets His son, Father, I have sinned against you.

[26 : 01] So there's this confession of a personal failure before His father. He's let His father down. Father, He says, I have sinned. And that is an amazing realization for anyone who is going to be found of God.

And in our ongoing lives, that when we do wrong, primarily and firstly, it's against God that we sin. It is against God that we have cheated.

It's against God that we've done things wrong. Yes, it may well affect other people. And it may well be that we need to seek their forgiveness also. But it is primarily a confession of our guilt before His innocence and His heart of our sin.

And it takes us, it's the only place, it's the only confession that takes us to the foot of the cross. And there we see Him, not punished for the congregation, not punished for other Christians, but punished for me.

That's where the eating of the bread personally and the drinking of the wine is so personal to every believer. It's not just we live our lives and at the end of every rushed prayer we say, and forgive our sins for ever and ever, amen for Jesus' sake.

[27 : 26] Not a kind of generalism, but a personal, real recounting of the things we know have broken Him. Not broken Him, but broken a relationship with Him, an honest confession of personal sin.

That is not only a once-for-all thing, I think it's an ongoing thing. For if we don't think we were sinned, then we're liars, really, just John say that.

But as well as that awareness of need in the confession of sin, there's also a real and genuine turning to God. The parable speaks about the Son in verse 20, got up, the Son went, got up and went to His Father.

It wasn't any use for Him to wallow in the pigs' feed and confess all these things. It wasn't good enough for Him to say, oh, I'll just send a letter.

He got up and He went back to His Father. And so there is a real turning to God in every lost person. And these are characteristics that assure us when people have been found of God and also when we have been found of God, that we're turning back to Him.

[28 : 41] Not just in word, not just in outward act, not even just in thought, but in reality. That we turn back to God so that He becomes the Lord of our lives.

That we go eyeball to eyeball with Him and we see Him as our Lord. We serve Him, we confess Him, we belong to Him. Much more importantly, out of here, in the real world, that we have turned to a real God and He is ours on a day-to-day basis.

And surely that is part of the ongoing being found by God that is our life as Christian people.

We look for these things, not just in ourselves, but we pray for them. And we witness in the sense of hoping to see and praying that these things will be triggered in people's lives.

That we love and who are lost, an awareness of need, a confession of personal sin and a genuine turning to God in their lives.

[29 : 51] So in conclusion and briefly, let's finish with a dose of real honesty. Who do you think that you are most tempted to look like in your Christian life?

Or are we most like in this parable? Are we most like the Father? Or are we most like the Elder Son?

What reflects our attitude to God and to our fellow human beings? Are we more like the Father who was rejoicing in resurrected life?

It simply cannot be overstated how wonderful this parable is, how unsearchable are the truths of this parable as it pictures God welcoming sinners home.

There is no words and each time we look at it there is more about it that astonishes me. Even as I was reading it tonight, I was thinking just at the end of it, He doesn't even rubbish His older Son.

[31 : 03] Despite His mean and miserly attitude, He acts towards Him without standing patience and grace. And here is the Father rejoicing in resurrected life.

Wonderful celebration for this miserable child who had said, Dad, I want you dead, but give me your money so I can have a great life.

Wonderful celebration because He saw that He was dead and He was alive and He was lost in His fount. Are we more like the Father in our interest, in mission and in evangelism and in sharing the Gospel and in hearing testimony?

Can we celebrate and rejoice and are we more thrilled when we hear of people coming to Christ than we are thrilled by anything else that happens in this universe?

Because we rejoice in the same way as heaven rejoices over sinners who repent. Can we rejoice in our own salvation in that way, that we have been lost and we are found?

[32 : 10] Hallelujah! What hell hits us with and what happens for the rest of my life? I can still rejoice because I am going to that home with my Saviour. Or are we in all honesty, and am I in all honesty more like the older Son, grumpy, self-absorbed and cynical?

Other people don't matter. Even His blood Son, brother, this Son of yours, He doesn't even acknowledge Him as a Son.

It's being found as irrelevant. The Kingdom truth is irrelevant. Only getting animated when He feels His own being Himself being shortchanged.

Can that be what we are like? Where the Kingdom and its progress have no real interest to us? And the salvation of others is a distant and fading reality.

And we only get animated when we are pointing out the failure in the church, or the failure of other Christians, or the misery of Christ's way.

[33 : 33] God forbid that that's what we are like. It's the great temptation of course, because Jesus knows exactly what we are like.

May God bless our study together from that passage of scripture.